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Author's Notes: I was watching "We're Off to See the Wizard" the other day, and I wondered exactly how Amanda came to the conclusion, with no facts to support her theory, that the Tin Man was Serdeych. This is my attempt at an explanation. A big thanks and a kahluah chocolate brownie go out to a_bit_dotty for taking on the task of beta reading for me!

The Tin Man Hasn't Got a Heart

Amanda awoke with a start to find two faces staring intently at her. "Phillip! Jamie! You scared me half to death! Why were you staring at me while I slept?" She rolled to one side and pushed herself into a seated position, wondering absently why the couch felt so hard and cold to her touch. She stretched her arms above her head and yawned. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she tried to focus on her sons.

Phillip motioned to Jamie and the younger boy quickly doused Amanda with a large bucket of water.

Sputtering, Amanda struggled to her feet, almost tripping over a stuffed animal that was at her feet. "Boys!" she exclaimed as she pushed her wet hair out of her eyes. "Just *what* do you think you are doing?"

The two boys nodding knowingly at each other. "Good witch," they said in unison.

"An *angry* Good Witch," Jamie added, noticing the sparks in Amanda's eyes. He retreated behind his brother and peered at Amanda cautiously over Phillip's shoulder.

"Good witch?" Amanda queried. "Are you two out of your minds? What possibly could have possessed you..." she stopped mid-tirade and looked closely at the boys. They were wearing the strangest clothes she had ever seen - bright green plaid shirts with white collars, matching shorts and horizontally striped knee socks! The ends of the shirts and shorts were jagged, as if the cloth had been ripped instead of cut. What was even more surprising was their hair. Both Phillip and Jamie were

bald in the front and had odd yellow colored hair, styled so that a huge curl sat atop each of their heads. Tentatively, Amanda reached out and touched Phillip's head. "What happened to your hair?" she gasped.

Phillip tilted his head sideways out of her grasp. Before Phillip could answer, Jamie darted out from behind him and pointed excitedly toward something behind Amanda. "Look! She'll take care of her."

Amanda turned and scanned the area that had been behind her. "She? I don't see anybody."

"Right there!" Phillip gestured impatiently, aiming his index finger in the same direction Jamie was indicating.

Following the path of their outstretched fingers with her eyes, Amanda spotted a bubble floating toward her that was growing larger as it approached. She backed up a step and once again stumbled over the stuffed animal that was on the ground.

"Don't be frightened. She's a good witch, too," Jamie explained, as he and Phillip knelt and bowed their heads, as if in prayer.

"Oh, *that's* comforting," Amanda muttered under her breath. "I'd hate to be done in by a Bad 'Bubble Stuff' Witch."

The bubble halted directly in front of Amanda and transformed into a woman wearing a voluminous peach-colored gown. There were wings attached to her back and a foot high ornate silver crown on her head. The woman smiled angelically at Amanda as she waved her star-tipped wand at the boys, motioning for them to rise.

"Mother?" Amanda choked out, shock apparent on her face. "How did you do that?"

Dotty laughed, an extremely infectious and calming sound, and her eyes crinkled as she gazed lovingly at Amanda. "My dear, *Good Witches* always travel by bubble." Turning to Phillip, she said, "Phillip, be a dear and give Amanda her dog."

Amanda shook her head. "There must be some mistake. I don't have a dog." Phillip picked up the stuffed animal from the ground and thrust it in Amanda's arms. "I'm sorry, this isn't mine. It must belong to someone else." She looked at the little brown and white animal. "There is something very familiar about it, though." Pulling it closer to her face, Amanda studied the dog carefully. "Oh my gosh, it's Pinto!"

She looked from the dog to Phillip and Jamie, once again taking in their odd appearance. For the first time, she noticed her surroundings. All around here were very small houses painted in bright colors. Flowers grew on either side of the road where they were standing. Looking down, she suddenly realized she was standing on a yellow brick road - *the* yellow brick road! Clutching the stuffed dog close to her chest, she whispered, "Pinto, I don't think we're in Arlington anymore."

"That is most certainly true. You are in the heart of Munchkin Land." Dotty made a slow circle in front of Amanda, waving her wand as she twirled. "Come out, come out wherever you are! It's all right. Amanda is a Good Witch. I have summoned her here for a very specific purpose." At her words, Munchkin citizens began popping out of houses and flowerbeds. Slowly, they made their way toward Dotty and formed a tight circle around Dotty, Amanda, Phillip and Jamie.

Although thoroughly confused at this turn of events, Amanda's curiosity won out over her confusion. She turned to Dotty for an explanation. "Excuse me, but you summoned me here? Why?"

"I'm afraid that Dorothy's murderer is once again on the loose. We need your help to bring him to justice."

"We?"

A familiar voice from a few inches behind Amanda responded, "Yes, 'We,' Amanda."

Amanda jumped at the sound. "Oh, you know how I hate it when you sneak up on me." She whirled around expecting to see Lee, but her eyes widened at the sight before her. 'I must be dreaming,' she thought. She closed her eyes, rubbed them and slowly opened them again. No, there he was, standing right in front of her - Lee. Only it wasn't Lee. It was the Scarecrow, complete with hat, gloves, burlap tunic and pants, straw stuffing and rope belt. She looked directly into his eyes, her confusion written all over her face.

Scarecrow smiled and reached out, taking Amanda's hands in his. "It's me, Amanda. Lee. Don't you recognize me?"

"Um, well, uh, yeah, of course I recognize you."

"Good." He pulled her into a brief hug. "I'm glad you were able to join us. We need all the help we can get." Reluctantly, he pulled out of the embrace. "Come on. Billy is waiting for us."

Lee placed his hand in the small of Amanda's back and began to lead her away from the Munchkin assembly. The sound of Dotty clearing her throat stopped Amanda in her tracks. She dropped Lee's hand and guiltily turned to face her mother.

"Amanda, although it is nice to see you **finally** taking an interest in a buff hunk..." Dotty paused to eye Lee appreciatively.

"Mother!"

"...it is not an excuse for abandoning your dog," Dotty finished. She pointed at Pinto who had, without Amanda even noticing, fallen to the ground when Lee grasped Amanda's hands.

As Amanda scooped up Pinto, Lee asked, "Uh, Amanda, do you really need to bring that thing? I don't think it will be of much use to us."

"Well, I guess not," Amanda began, pausing when she met Dotty's disapproving stare. She turned to Lee and pleaded with him with her eyes. "I can't just leave him here. He's my responsibility. It's not a problem, is it?"

Lee shook his head and sighed. "Oh, all right, Amanda. Bring the dog. Let's just get going. Billy is waiting."

"Wait one minute, young man," Dotty ordered. She walked slowly toward Amanda and stopped in front of her daughter. Smiling up at Amanda, she said, "You are not leaving without a kiss from your mother to keep you safe." Dotty stood on tiptoe and kissed Amanda gently on the forehead. "There. Now, you and the Scarecrow be on your way."

Lee grabbed Amanda's free hand and quickly pulled her away from Dotty and the boys. The crowd of Munchkins parted to allow the pair to move past them along the yellow brick road into town.

"Lee, where exactly is Billy?"

"In his office, of course."

"Oh, of course. In his office." Amanda nodded. She furrowed her brow, trying to make sense of that information. "Lee?"

"What now, Amanda?" Lee asked, a trace of exasperation evident in his voice.

"Why does Billy have an office in Munchkin Land? I never thought it was a hotbed of intrigue."

Lee gave Amanda a look that plainly said, 'You are giving me a headache, Amanda.'

Amanda quickly jumped in to stop Lee from saying whatever was on his mind.

"Never mind, Lee. I'll know when I get there."

The two walked in silence until they reached the center of Munchkin Land. Lee led Amanda to a building smack in the middle of town. The building was a shade larger than the houses surrounding it. It was built upon a small rise, so that you had to walk up three steps to reach the front door.

Just as Lee's foot landed on the top step, a loud voice from within the building bellowed, "Scarecrow! Is that you?"

"Yeah, Billy. Amanda is with me."

Billy emerged from the building and stood just outside the doorway. "Well, what are you waiting for? Get your butts in here. We have work to do!"

Lee continued toward Billy's office, but Amanda froze and stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed at Billy. She had always thought his sweater vests and three-piece suits were rather conservative, but what he was wearing now was the opposite end of the spectrum. 'When Mr. Melrose decides to change his look, he certainly goes all out,' Amanda thought. Instead of the 'white shirt, gray suit and solid tie look' Billy usually sported, he was wearing a green and yellow plaid vest, green pants and a green jacket with puffy sleeves and tails that hung to the ground. The coat didn't begin to cover Billy's stomach. Attached to the vest was a huge pocket watch on a gold chain. A blue bow tie nestled snugly under Billy's chin. On his feet were blue shoes that curled up at the toes. Although Amanda never thought Billy's gray

fedora was particularly stylish, it was a lot better than the huge green stovepipe hat that was now perched precariously on his head. As if all that weren't strange enough, Billy's eyebrows had been shaped to resemble tilde marks.

"Amanda. Amanda!" Lee's impatient voice broke through Amanda's trance. "Would you come on? We don't have all day."

Amanda walked slowly toward the entrance to Billy's office, her eyes never leaving Billy.

"Good morning, Amanda. Thank you for coming so quickly." Billy smiled at Amanda as he ushered her into the office. "Please have a seat." He gestured toward a chair near his desk.

Amanda slowly lowered herself onto the chair, keeping her gaze firmly locked on Billy.

"Mr. Mayor, now that the *housewife* has arrived, would it be possible to get back to business?" Francine addressed Billy, impatience evident in her tone.

Having been so intent on studying Billy, Amanda had not noticed the blonde agent was in the small office. She swiveled her head in Francine's direction and eyed her suspiciously. "I thought the Wicked Witch of the West was dead," Amanda commented.

"I am *not* the Wicked Witch of the West!" Francine declared emphatically, glaring at Billy and Lee as they stifled laughs. "Why does everyone keep calling me that?"

"Um, well, it's probably the clothes," Amanda replied, referring to the long black dress and cape Francine was wearing. "The pointy black hat and broomstick probably don't help, either. If you aren't the Wicked Witch of the West, who are you?"

"I am the Witch of the Southwest, of course. The designer original red, white and gold striped stockings are a dead giveaway," Francine retorted indignantly, clearly annoyed with Amanda. Her eyes narrowed as she glared at the housewife-turned-spy. "A *trained agent* would have known that immediately."

"Francine, button it," ordered Billy. "We have a killer to find, so let's focus on that and not on your flair for accuracy in undercover wardrobe."

"But Billy..." Francine began, only to be stopped cold by Billy's 'No more nonsense, and I mean it' look. She rolled her eyes, crossed her arms and leaned forcefully back into her chair.

Billy, satisfied that Francine would keep her tart tongue curbed for a few minutes, launched into a summary of the case. He shuffled through a number of pictures that were scattered on his desk. "All these women, from different cities and countries, have been murdered by close-range gunshot wounds or strangulation. Other than the fact that they all knew you, Lee," Billy paused and looked at Lee, "most of these women were part of the Oz network. That points the finger of suspicion firmly at Serdeych."

"It's Serdeych, Billy. I'd bet my life on it," Lee asserted. "And I think I know who Serdeych is - the Wizard of Oz himself."

Francine shook her head, amazed that Lee would think such a thing about his mentor and friend. "Lee, that's quite a leap. There's no evidence that the Wizard is involved in the murders. There is certainly nothing that points to him killing Dorothy. You know that better than anyone. What makes you think it's him?"

Lee paced behind Francine and Amanda. "Who else? He knew all these women, or had some contact with them. He could get close enough to them to kill them without raising any suspicion. He had means and opportunity..."

Billy placed both hands on his desk and leaned forward. "What about motive, Scarecrow?" he demanded, stopping Lee's nervous movement. "What could Barnes have to gain from killing all these women?"

"I don't know, Billy, but I'm gonna find out." Lee and Billy locked eyes. The muscle in Lee's jaw began to twitch. "He will **not** get away with attempting to kill Amanda."

"All right, Scarecrow. Get out to the Emerald City and see what you can dig up on Barnes."

"Lee's not exactly objective in this matter," Francine pointed out, unnecessarily, to her supervisor. "He'll need help, Billy," she added hopefully.

Billy smiled indulgently at Francine. "Yes, he will, Francine." Turning to Lee, he said, "Take Amanda with you. She may spot something you wouldn't. She isn't close to Barnes and will be objective."

Lee reached for Amanda's hand and pulled her up from the chair. "You heard the man, Amanda. Let's get going."

"Excuse me, Sir," Amanda addressed Billy. "You're sending us to the Emerald City?"

"That's right, Amanda. Barnes is staying in his old stomping grounds." To Lee, Billy added, "I'll notify the others to meet you there."

Lee pulled Amanda toward the door. "Come on, Amanda. We're off to see the Wizard."

"We're off to see the Wizard," Amanda repeated incredulously as she and Lee exited Billy's office. Standing in the bright sunshine, Amanda shielded her eyes and looked off into the distance. "Which way is the Emerald City?" she asked Lee.

Lee pointed in the general direction to his left. "That way."

"I suppose we follow the yellow brick road to get there?" Amanda asked.

"Of course. How else would we get to the Emerald City?"

"Yes, of course. How silly of me to think there might be an easier way," Amanda grumbled.

Lee looked at her questioningly. "What's wrong with following the yellow brick road? That's the way we **always** get to the Emerald City."

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all." Amanda followed Lee down the steps to the road. Under her breath, she muttered to Pinto, "As long as you don't mind talking trees that throw apples at you, wild animals in the forest and poisonous poppy fields, what could be better than taking the yellow brick road?"

"Let's get moving, Amanda. We have a long trip ahead of us."

Amanda sighed and fell into step beside Lee. "Nobody is **ever** going to believe this."

After a few hours of walking, both Lee and Amanda lost in their own private thoughts, Amanda decided it was time to get an answer to something that was on her mind. "Lee, I've been wondering about something."

"What?"

"Where are the Cowardly Lion and the Tin Man?"

"The Lion will meet us in the Emerald City. We'll hook up with the Tin Man at his house. They are 'the others' Billy mentioned." Lee chuckled. "Oh, and don't let Fielder hear you call him 'Cowardly.' He thinks he's lost that moniker."

"Fielder. *Fred Fielder* is the Cowardly Lion?"

"The one and the same." Lee shook his head. "Who would have thought that something as silly as a medal could change Fielder's entire outlook on life?"

Amanda raised her eyebrows. "The same person who thought giving a certain someone a 'Doctor of Thinkology' degree would make him realize he had a brain all along."

Lee stopped in the middle of the road and gazed thoughtfully at Amanda. "What do you mean?"

"Scarecrow *thought* he didn't have a brain, but he was definitely the smartest member of the group. At least, that's the way *I* saw it." Amanda looked into Lee's eyes and smiled nervously at him. "You are the smartest man I know."

Reaching into his tunic, Lee pulled out a well-worn piece of paper. Unfurling it, he showed it to Amanda. "Do you mean that this piece of paper is worthless?"

"Oh, no, Lee. It's not worthless at all. It's a reminder that you *do* have a brain."

Lee smiled at Amanda as he slowly re-rolled his diploma. "Are you trying to tell me the Lion doesn't need his medal?"

Amanda grinned. "Noooo. Fred needs all the help he can get."

"You're right about that. After the Savior incident, I thought he would choose to permanently keep his desk job." Lee chuckled, remembering the sight of Fielder's backside running as fast as possible away from the Savior missile. "That medal gave him the confidence he needed to return to the field."

"Everyone needs a little encouragement now and again," Amanda noted, tapping the furred diploma with her fingertip, "even the Scarecrow."

Lee tucked the scroll back into his shirt. "Then I had better take good care of it." Surveying the landmarks near where they stood, he noted that they were getting close to their first stop. "We should be at the Tin Man's house in under an hour. We can rest for a bit when we get there, unless you need to take a breather."

"I'm fine. Let's keep going."

Taking Amanda's hand in his, Lee set the pace for the Tin Man's house.

Some time later, Amanda broke the companionable silence. "Lee?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you really think the Wizard is responsible for all those murders?"

"I don't *want* to think so, Amanda, but it makes sense. Other than me, he's the only one who knew all those women, and I know *I* didn't murder them."

"If Serdeych is out for revenge, doesn't it make sense that he'd go after Oz Network members, as well as people close to the original strike team? Paul has no reason to do that."

Lee thought about that for a few seconds. "That's logical," he admitted.

Amanda shrugged. "I have a logical mind."

"So you keep telling me," Lee said with a grin that grew wider when Amanda rolled her eyes at him. "Maybe Paul isn't Serdeych. Maybe he is. We won't know for sure until we get to the Emerald City."

"How much further to the Tin Man's house?"

Looking off into the distance, Lee gauged the distance. "It's just around that bend up ahead, about a mile into the woods."

As they approached the wooded area, Amanda moved closer to Lee, so that their shoulders touched. She glanced nervously from side to side, keeping a watchful eye out for talking trees.

"Amanda, is something wrong?"

"These woods are creepy," she answered, shuddering slightly.

Lee feigned shock. "Don't tell me that Mrs. Jr. Trailblazer is frightened of a forest! What will all the other Jr. Trailblazer moms think?"

"Oh, Lee. I'm not frightened, just a little spooked. We don't have many talking trees that throw things at you in Virginia, you know."

"They're nothing to be afraid of, Amanda. They don't speak unless spoken to first, and, besides," he teased, "their aim isn't very good."

Amanda pointedly ignored Lee's comment and continued scanning the sides of the road. Just ahead of them, she spotted a small cottage on their left. "Is that the Tin Man's house?"

"It sure is. I can't wait to see him again. It's been ten years." Lee hurried Amanda to the small cabin. When they reached the front, Lee knocked loudly on the heavy wood door.

"No answer," Amanda said. "Wasn't he expecting us?"

Lee nodded. "Yeah, unless he didn't get Billy's message. I'll check around back - you stay here."

"I'm going with you," Amanda declared.

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"Amanda," Lee sighed, "I don't have time for this. For once, would you just do as I tell you and wait here?" Expecting Amanda to launch into one of her explanations

of why she should stick with him, Lee spoke before Amanda could say anything. "With Serdeych on the loose, I don't want you in any unnecessary danger. You'll be safer right here than in the woods." Sensing she was starting to waver, Lee added, "There are talking trees out there. You don't want to tangle with one of them, do you?" Lee watched a number of emotions cross Amanda's face as she considered his arguments.

"Oh, all right. I'll wait here," Amanda finally agreed, bringing a smile of satisfaction to Lee's face. "I don't have to like it, though. Be careful," she called after Lee as he rounded the tiny house. "'Stay here, Amanda.' 'Wait here, Amanda.' Ooh, when will that man understand that he needs me to watch his back?" she asked Pinto. "And why am I talking to a stuffed dog?" Amanda set Pinto down behind her and tried the door. "Locked." She reached into her back pocket and retrieved the lock pick set Leatherneck had given her. She chose an appropriately sized tool and crouched in front of the door, making short work of the lock. When the handle turned, Amanda looked at Pinto with a self-satisfied smirk. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Amanda stood and slowly pushed the door open, calling as she moved forward, "Hello! Is anybody home?" A faint ticking noise was the only sound that greeted her. Right in front of her, on a low table, was the Tin Man's heart-shaped watch. It was attached to a bomb.

Before Amanda could react, she was tackled from the front and propelled out the door, landing with a thud on top of Pinto. An explosion drowned out her exclamation of surprise. The weight of the body on top of her prevented her from getting up to see what had happened.

A few moments later, Lee rolled to the side off Amanda, still holding her to the ground with one arm. The two of them raised their heads and watched the Tin Man's house go up in flames.

"Oh my gosh!" Amanda exclaimed. "What happened? How did you know?"

"I saw the bomb from the side window, and climbed in from there to see if I could disarm it. Opening the door triggered the mechanism. Thank God I got to you before it went off." Lee jerked Amanda around so they were facing each other. "What were you thinking? You could have been killed!"

Amanda shook her head. "I don't know, I was just... I was only..."

"Trying to help," the two said in unison.

"I'm sorry, Lee. I didn't know there was a bomb."

Lee stood and pulled Amanda to her feet. "I know, I know." He took a long look at the burning house. "Let's take a quick look around and see if there's any evidence of who rigged that bomb." The two carefully scoured the area around the cabin, to no avail. A few minutes later, Lee groaned in frustration. "It's no use, Amanda. Any clues have been destroyed by the fire." He leaned back against a tree and stared at the flames. "At least the Tin Man wasn't home. That heat would have left him in a melted heap."

Amanda reached out and fingered some of the straw that had shaken loose from Lee's shirt. She looked up and stared into his eyes, both of them understanding that Scarecrow's stuffing made him much more susceptible to fire than the Tin Man. "Lee, if you hadn't pushed me out of the way..." she stopped, too choked up to continue.

"It's all right, Amanda." Lee pulled Amanda into his arms, so that her head was against his shoulder. He rested his chin against her head and rubbed her back. "I'm OK."

Pulling back a little in Lee's arms, Amanda raised her head to look him in the eyes again. "You're OK *this time*, Scarecrow. What about the next time? We both know this," she inclined head toward the house, "was Serdeych's handiwork. He isn't going to rest until you're dead."

"Which is why we have to get to him first." Lee gave Amanda a small squeeze and released her. "He may think he's winning, but the Tin Man and I still have a few cards up our sleeves. There were good reasons we were chosen for the Oz Network. We had better get to the Emerald City as fast as possible. I can't get in touch with Billy to tell him about this until we get there."

Nodding her agreement, Amanda turned toward the front of the house. "Let me just get Pinto."

"Amanda, we're in a hurry."

"It'll just take a second," Amanda said, hurrying to the front of the house. Pinto still lay on the ground where Amanda and Lee had landed on him. When she knelt to retrieve the squished stuffed animal, a charred object in the root of a nearby tree caught her eye. She tucked the dog under one arm and gingerly picked up the burned item with her other hand.

"What do you have there?" Lee asked.

Amanda stood and held the object in front of her to allow Lee a clear view of it. Dangling from a blackened chain was the Tin Man's barely recognizable watch. "The Tin Man's heart," Amanda whispered.

Lee reached out his hand and Amanda laid the watch on his palm, letting the chain fall on top of it. He closed his eyes and clenched his fist around the melted timepiece. The muscle in his jaw began to work furiously. Slowly, Lee raised his head and looked at Amanda. His eyes were filled with hatred. "Come on, Amanda. Serdeych is waiting."

Wordlessly, Amanda nodded and placed her hand in Lee's. Together, they returned to the yellow brick road to continue their journey to the Emerald City.

Amanda couldn't keep her mind off the watch. She closed her eyes and saw it attached to the bomb, then in a lump in Lee's hand. She couldn't bring herself to voice the one thought that was echoing in her brain: 'The Tin Man doesn't have his heart.'

In the hour since they had left the Tin Man's house, Lee's pace had not decreased a bit. If anything, he appeared to be moving faster each minute. Even Amanda's long legs were beginning to have difficulty keeping in step with him, but she didn't want to ask Lee to stop. Casting a sidelong glance at Scarecrow, she watched him clench and unclench the fist that still held the mangled watch. 'I think that's about the thousandth time he's done that,' she noted. Involuntarily, Amanda shuddered a little as she thought about what might happen if Lee came face-to-face with the

Wizard in his present state of mind. Lee's actions would have severe consequences for all of them. She nervously chewed on her lower lip while trying to come up with something, *anything*, to snap Lee out of his dangerous mood. Lost in her thoughts, Amanda slightly slowed her pace and trailed a few steps behind Lee.

Suddenly, Lee stopped short. Caught off guard, Amanda walked right into him. "Amanda, that isn't funny."

Amanda, the picture of innocence, asked, "Funny? What isn't funny?"

"Don't play dumb with me." Lee shook a finger at her. "You know you were whistling 'If I Only Had a Brain.' I don't find that particularly amusing. Are you deliberately trying to annoy me?"

"No, I was just hoping you'd notice I'm here and on the verge of collapse from trying to keep up with you. What do you think this is, the 'see how fast we can get to the Emerald City' race?" A smile played around the corners of Amanda's mouth as she watched Lee perform the familiar action of raking his hand through his hair. 'Running fingers through straw doesn't have quite the same effect as through soft, feathered brown hair,' she thought, 'but it's still cute.' Amanda ducked her head and covered her mouth to hide a full smile when Lee's hand caught in his hat.

Lee impatiently pulled his hand loose and absently rubbed the muscles at the base of his neck. "Ah, I'm sorry, Amanda. I wasn't paying attention." He settled his gaze on his partner and was surprised to notice that she was somewhat flushed and breathing a little hard. He put his hand under her elbow and steered her to the side of the road. "Sit down and rest for a minute."

Amanda lowered herself onto a large stump and patted the spot next to her. "There's room for two." She knew Lee was anxious to keep moving, but Amanda was determined to make him take a break and clear his head. "Emerald City isn't going anywhere, Scarecrow."

Lee considered Amanda's statement for a moment, then shrugged and sat beside her. "You're right. I just want to get there as soon as possible."

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Amanda responded, with just a hint of sarcasm. She propped an elbow on her knee to rest her chin on her hand. Shifting slightly to meet Lee's eyes, she queried, "What do you plan to do when we get there?"

"Kill Serdeych," Lee said simply, as if it should be perfectly obvious.

"You still don't know who Serdeych is!" Amanda protested.

Lee's hazel eyes narrowed as he glared at her. "I don't?"

"No, you don't."

"Amanda..."

"All you have is a gut feeling that it's the Wizard. You have no *proof*. The murdered women were part of the Oz Network or your... um... ah..." Lee squirmed a bit next to Amanda as she searched for an appropriate description, uncomfortable that his past was interfering in his present in this manner, "acquaintances,' but no clues were found at any of the murder scenes. We didn't find any at the Tin Man's house, either," Amanda reminded Lee. "There is no way you can be 100% sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Paul Barnes is Serdeych."

"In here," Lee tapped his chest with his index finger, "I can't shake the feeling that Paul may have been playing us all for fools for a very long time. In my head, though," he sighed deeply, "I know you're right."

"Of course I am. Remember, *I'm* the logical one."

Lee couldn't help but laugh. "Amanda, your logic usually escapes me, but this time I actually understand you. I should probably be worried about that." He gently squeezed her hand. "Thank you for making me see things from a different perspective."

"Any time, Scarecrow." Amanda smiled at Lee and returned the squeeze. She was pleased that she had managed to steer his train of thought onto a different track. She was even more pleased when Lee didn't release her hand. Instead, he slowly rubbed his thumb along the back of it, causing her heart to beat a staccato rhythm against her ribcage. She licked her lips and swallowed hard, desperately trying to return some moisture to her mouth and throat, which suddenly felt as dry as the Sahara Desert.

With amusement, and no small degree of pleasure, Lee watched Amanda's reactions to the motion of his thumb. 'If only we didn't have work to do,' he thought. Reluctantly, he dropped Amanda's hand, giving it a few pats before resting his hand

on his knee. "A few more minutes of rest, and then we should be on our way." He looked away from Amanda and willed his breathing to return to normal.

As usual, Amanda did her best to smooth over the slightly uncomfortable situation. "Lee, could I ask you a question?"

"Could I stop you?" Lee asked with a grin.

Amanda clucked her tongue at him. "No." She tentatively touched the hand in which Lee still gripped the Tin Man's watch. "What happens to the Tin Man without that?"

"I really don't know, Amanda. Without his medal, the Lion is just a big 'fraidy cat," he paused and looked at Amanda thoughtfully, "but *you* say I have a brain even without my diploma." Lee shook his head and slowly opened his fist to stare at the melted watch. "I can't predict what a heartless Tin Man will be like."

"Heartless," Amanda repeated softly. A feeling of trepidation was growing in the pit of her stomach.

Abruptly, Lee stood and shoved the watch into his pocket. Looking at the sky he commented, "It's getting dark, and we still have quite a ways to go. We need to get moving to make it through the woods by morning." Turning away from Amanda, he strode purposefully to the road.

Amanda was determined to keep Lee from settling back into a dark mood. She rose and slowly walked toward him. With a sly smile and a wink, she linked her arm with Lee's and began to sing 'We're Off to See the Wizard.'

Sighing in resignation, Lee mumbled, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." He added his voice to Amanda's and allowed her to 'force' him into skipping with her as they made their way deeper into the woods on the road to the Emerald City.

As Amanda cheerily launched into yet another happy-go-lucky skipping song, Lee disentangled his arm from hers and dramatically placed his hands over his ears. "Oh, Amanda, please. No more singing," he groaned. "I've had about all I can take."

"No more singing?" Amanda pouted as she pulled Lee's hands from his ears. "I was just getting to the really fun songs, like 'Found a Peanut' and 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat,'" she teased.

"That's OK. I'll pass. Besides," Lee lowered his voice to a whisper and made a slow scan of the woods on either side of them with his eyes, "right before dawn, just before they retreat to their lairs to sleep, is when the wild animals do most of their hunting. All that singing would just attract unwanted attention. Now, me, being made of straw, wouldn't be of much interest to them, but you..." Lee paused for dramatic effect, "even with hardly any meat on your bones, would be a tasty morsel for a lion." He winked and grinned at her.

Amanda cocked her head to one side and raised an eyebrow. "Or a tiger, I presume?"

"That's right. Or a bear," he said with mock seriousness.

"Right. Lions and tigers and bears ---"

"Oh My Gosh!" they finished together, laughing.

Amanda peered intently down the road. "All I can see are trees and more trees. Will we be out of the woods any time soon?"

"In no time at all. Once we go around the next bend, we'll be able to see the city at the most perfect time - sunrise."

"Oh, let's hurry. I can't wait to see it." Amanda's eyes lit up and she pulled on Lee's arm, urging him forward at a quicker pace. "Let's get a move on, Scarecrow."

Lee let Amanda take the lead. Even though he had seen the sparkling green city many times, her excitement was rubbing off on him. As they neared the turn in the road, Lee hung back a little. He wanted to observe Amanda as she experienced her first view of the Emerald City, expecting her reaction to be one of pure amazement. She did not disappoint.

"Oh, WOW!" Amanda exclaimed. "It's absolutely gorgeous! I mean, I've seen pictures, and watched the movie, but in person..." she turned to Lee, her eyes wide with wonder, "... it's, it's, well, it's incredible! I can't believe people actually **live** in a place so beautiful!"

"It's quite a sight," Lee agreed. "Wait until you see the inside."

Impossibly, Amanda's eyes grew even wider. "The inside! Oh, will we get to see the one and only horse of a different color?"

Lee shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. You really want to see it? Aren't you allergic to horses?"

"Well, yeah, but I'll suffer in order to see *that* horse." A flash of something behind Lee blinded Amanda momentarily and she flinched. When her eyes re-focused, she realized something was heading directly at Lee. "Lee! Look out!" she yelled, pointing above his head.

Reacting immediately to Amanda's warning, Lee performed his patented somersault move, narrowly avoiding being covered by a large net. "What the...?" Quickly, he jumped to his feet and rushed to Amanda's side. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm OK."

"What did you see?"

Amanda shook her head. "I'm not sure."

"Amanda, c'mon! You had to have seen *something*. You warned me." Lee placed his hands on her shoulders and gave her a little shake. "Think!"

"The sun reflected off something shiny over there," Amanda pointed to a large tree near the side of the road, "so I closed my eyes for a second. The next thing I saw was that net heading straight for you."

The duo walked around the net to the tree Amanda indicated. Crouching at the base of it, Lee spotted a number of footprints. Running his hand over the ones closest to the tree, he commented, "They're deeper right here. He must have stood here for a while waiting for us." He looked up at Amanda and their eyes met.

She gulped. "Waiting for us?"

"Yeah." Lee stood, keeping his gaze locked on hers. "I need to follow these into the forest. You stay here."

"But Lee..."

"I mean it, Amanda. This time, you stay put and do NOT try to help. Understand?"

Recognizing the determined set of Lee's jaw, Amanda decided it was best not to argue with him - this time. "Oh, all right. I'll wait for you here."

Lee breathed a sigh of relief. He had expected more of a fight. "Good. If I'm not back in an hour, you go straight to the Emerald City and contact Billy. Got that?"

"Got it. Lee," Amanda placed her hand on his forearm. "Please be careful."

"Always," Lee said with a small smile. He turned and disappeared into the underbrush.

"'Always' he says," Amanda murmured to herself. She held Pinto out in front of her so she was looking the stuffed animal right in the eye. "He **says** that, but he's **never** careful. What am **I** gonna do while he's off following footprints?" She walked to the road and knelt to examine the net. On the side nearest the tree where they found the footprints, a rope lay across the road like a snake. "Hmm, this must be how it was held above the road." Amanda pulled the rope toward her until the end was in her hand. She examined it with a practiced eye. "Pinto, I think this rope was cut by something extremely sharp." She closed her eyes and concentrated on what happened just before she saw the net descending upon Lee. Her eyes flew open as she remembered. "An axe! I saw someone slice this rope with an axe!"

"What did you say?"

The sound of Lee's voice right behind her made Amanda jump. Through a clenched jaw, she muttered, "So help me, Scarecrow, if you do that to me one more time, I won't be responsible for what I do." She stood and turned to face him.

"Sorry. It's second nature." He shrugged off Amanda's irritation. "What was that you said about an axe?"

Amanda held the rope out to Lee. "See how this has been cut? I remember seeing an axe slashing it. That must have been the shiny object reflecting the sun. What about the footprints."

Lee sighed. "No luck there. A couple of hundred yards in, there's nothing but rock. No more footprints."

"So, now what do we do?"

"Exactly what we planned to do." Lee took the rope from Amanda's hand and dropped it on the road. He slipped his hand into hers and inclined his head toward the Emerald City. "The Wizard awaits. Shall we?"

Amanda nodded and the duo once again continued their trek to the Wizard's residence. They soon were near enough to the fields of red flowers that surrounded the city to smell their fragrance.

"What's the matter?" Amanda asked when Lee suddenly stopped.

"The flowers," he said, so softly Amanda had to strain to hear him. "Something isn't right. Can you smell them?"

A familiar scent wafted on the air. "Of course, I can smell them. Don't they smell wonderful?" A sudden realization hit her. "Oh my gosh! They're roses!" She turned to face Lee. "Why are they roses? They're supposed to be poppies."

Lee swallowed hard. "Dorothy died under a blanket of roses. Serdeych knows I can't stand the smell of them. He's taunting me." Staring off into the distance, he replayed the events of Dorothy's death in his mind.

"Lee. Lee!" Amanda's voice and an insistent tug on his sleeve shook Lee out of his reverie. "You can't let him get to you. That's exactly what he wants."

"You're right. Absolutely." Lee gave himself a mental shake to clear the memories out of his head. "Thinking about the past will only cloud the issue at hand."

"Standing still won't get us any answers, either, as you are so fond of telling me."

A ghost of a smile played around the corners of Lee's mouth. "Is that your way of telling me I should get my butt in gear?"

Amanda grinned. "Well, I wouldn't have put it quite *that* way, but, yeah."

"OK, let's go." Arm in arm the pair headed for the fields of roses and the city that was now only a few miles away. "Ah, just one thing, Amanda."

"What's that?"

"No singing."

Emerald City loomed large in front of Amanda and Lee. Scarecrow took the steps to the entrance two at a time and stopped just in front of the humungous door. He looked back over his shoulder and smiled at Amanda. She stood at the base of the steps, her head hung back and her mouth agape as she looked up at the fairy-castle-like structure.

"Oh My Gosh!" she uttered in amazement. "I can't believe I'm actually standing in front of the Emerald City! It's so big and so, um, so... *green*!"

"What did you expect it to be - red? It's not called the *Ruby* City," Lee teased.

Amanda turned a withering gaze on Scarecrow. "Of course not, Lee. I knew it was green, just not *this* green."

Lee nodded. "Yeah, it's really green all right." He pointed to the door. "Are you gonna go in with me or stand there admiring the color all day?"

With a slightly exasperated look on her face, Amanda hurried up the steps to join him. "Well, go ahead, knock."

"I'm knocking, I'm knocking," Lee answered, rapping his fist against the door.

Almost immediately, a panel in the door slid open and the angry head of the Guardian of the Gates appeared. "Who has the nerve to disturb me?" he roared. His expression changed to one of pure delight upon seeing the visitors. "Scarecrow! How nice to see you again! It's been a long time! Let me get the door for you." The Guardian's head disappeared from view and the panel slid shut. A moment later, the gigantic door swung open. The now jovial Guardian motioned to Lee and Amanda, "Come in, come in!"

Lee placed his hand under Amanda's elbow and ushered her through the door. As she passed the Guardian, she offered a cheery "Thank you."

As he pushed the door back into place, the Guardian asked, "What brings you to the Emerald City?"

"Ah, well," Lee sent a warning glance in Amanda's direction, silently telling her to let him do the talking, "we're here to see my old pal, the Wizard. I understand he's here."

"Yes, yes, he's here," the Guardian acknowledged, "but I'm not sure if he'll see you. He hasn't spoken to anyone since he returned from his trip last week."

Amanda and Lee exchanged a surprised glance. Neither was aware the Wizard had ever **left** Emerald City.

"He'll see me," Lee insisted. "Just tell him I'm here."

Detecting an undercurrent of something he couldn't quite place his finger on, the Guardian thought it wise to agree with Scarecrow. "Yes, Scarecrow. Right away." He waved at someone in the distance then turned his attention to Amanda. "And who is this?"

Amanda reached out to shake the Guardian's hand. "Mrs. King. Amanda King. Pleased to meet you."

"And you are?"

"My partner," Lee replied curtly, effectively cutting off further questioning. "Could we cut the chit-chat and go see the Wizard?"

The Guardian dropped Amanda's hand and pointed at the carriage that had pulled up in front of them. "Now that your transportation has arrived, you can proceed to the Wizard's office. I'll just run ahead and warn, ahem, **tell** him you are here."

"Oooh, it's the horse of a different color!" Amanda exclaimed. "Look, Lee, it's changing from yellow to red!!" She made a move toward the horse.

"Amanda," Lee said through gritted teeth, "you can look at the horse later. We have work to do!" He grabbed her hand and steered her toward the carriage. "In you go."

Reluctantly, Amanda allowed Lee to help her into the horse-drawn buggy. "As I recall, 'later' means 'never,'" she mumbled as she plopped onto the seat.

"I heard that," Lee said as he scrambled into the seat to Amanda's left. He captured her right hand in his left and waited for her to meet his gaze. "I'm sorry, Amanda. I know you're disappointed. We just can't afford to waste a second."

"I know, Lee. It's all right." Amanda smiled warmly at him. "I can look at the horse from here."

Lee returned the smile and squeezed her hand. As the carriage began to move, he casually threw his right arm along the back of the seat and rested his hand lightly on Amanda's shoulder. She leaned back and settled against him to enjoy the ride. "If you look over there," Lee indicated the far side of the City with his head, not wanting to lose contact with Amanda, "you can see the entrance to the Wizard's offices."

"Very impressive," Amanda observed. When Lee snorted in disgust, she quickly added, "It's a little too much green, though." She took a long look around the City. "As a matter of fact, *everything* here is a little too green for my tastes. They certainly did beat the theme to death, didn't they? I mean, what's the harm in having a little blue or yellow or orange here and there? It's not like they'd have to rename the place to the Rainbow City or the Multi-Colored City or," Amanda stopped when she noticed Lee's bemused expression. "Oh, I'm rambling, aren't I? I'm sorry. You know I talk when I'm nervous, and I guess I'm more nervous than I thought about meeting the Wizard. I didn't think I would be, and I shouldn't be, but I guess I am - nervous, that is." She took a deep breath and smiled apologetically at Lee. "Sorry."

'How does she do that in one breath?' Lee asked himself for the millionth time. He patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Nervous is good. If the Wizard is Serdeych, you need to be on your guard. You wouldn't be alert if you were comfortable."

"I suppose so, but" Amanda was interrupted by shouts of 'Scarecrow!' and 'There he is!' from just ahead of them. "What's all that noise?"

The carriage driver, who looked suspiciously like the Guardian, answered, "News of Scarecrow's arrival has spread throughout the city. The townspeople have gathered to greet him. The carriage will not be able to get through the crowd. I'm afraid you'll have to walk."

"Great. Just great. That blows my plan of slipping in quietly to see Paul," Lee groaned.

"I don't suppose there's a back way into his office?" Amanda asked hopefully. The exasperated look on Lee's face gave her the answer. "No, of course there isn't. If there was one, you would have mentioned it already." She turned her attention to the area in front of them. The very large crowd, all dressed in green from head to toe, had just come into view. Guessing there were a couple hundred people waiting for them, Amanda remarked, "You certainly are popular here."

Lee shrugged noncommittally.

As they drew closer, Amanda could pick out faces in the crowd. "Mostly women," she dryly noted.

Lee coughed and quickly changed the subject. "Driver, we'll get out here." The crowd was pressing in on them faster than he had anticipated. As soon as the carriage stopped, Lee let go of Amanda and leapt to the ground. "Come on. Maybe we can outrun them."

Amanda took Lee's outstretched hand and jumped to the ground. Hand in hand, they rushed toward the Wizard's office. Unfortunately, the crowd was faster. Before they had taken ten steps, a statuesque blonde intercepted them. "No flowers, Scarecrow? You always bring me flowers."

"Um, sorry, ah..."

"Sammi," the blonde supplied.

"Right, Sammi. Sorry, Sammi, I'm here to see the Wizard this visit." Lee neatly stepped around Sammi and continued through the crowd, practically dragging Amanda behind him.

Their progress was impeded by a number of women. After Sammi, it was Brandi, a voluptuous redhead who pouted when Scarecrow brushed her off without a second

thought. Next was Buffy, who made a suggestion that actually made Lee blush. At first, the encounters amused Amanda. As more and more women approached Lee, however, she became annoyed. By the time they reached the entrance to Paul's office, Amanda was downright angry. "Lee, don't they even see that I'm right here?" Amanda demanded to know.

"What?"

"I'm right here, right next to you, and all those women," she jerked her thumb over her shoulder toward the crowd, "act like I'm invisible."

Lee turned to face Amanda and glanced past her at the sea of faces. More than half of them were women, most of whom he knew quite well. "What's the problem? We're not **together** or anything."

"No, we aren't **together**, but **they** don't know we're not **together**, do they?"

"Your point?"

"Ooh!" Amanda squeezed her eyes shut and hugged Pinto tightly against her chest in frustration. "For a 'highly trained intelligence operative,' you really are clueless sometimes."

The light suddenly dawned on Scarecrow and he understood what Amanda was trying to say, or rather, trying desperately **not** to say. The subject made him more than a little uneasy. "Amanda, please," Lee sighed wearily. "Do we have to discuss this now?"

A soldier chose that precise moment to appear. "The Wizard will see you now, Scarecrow."

"Thank you!" Lee enthusiastically said to the soldier, silently thanking his lucky stars that he had been granted a temporary reprieve from an unwanted conversation with Amanda. He knew the topic would surface again, but for now, he could avoid it. He held out his hand to his partner. "Let's not keep the Wizard waiting."

Amanda placed her hand in Lee's. "Don't think you're completely off the hook, Scarecrow."

"Oh, believe me, Amanda, I know."

To get the attention of the agents, the soldier cleared his throat. Waving his hand toward a large doorway, he invited, "This way, please." Amanda and Lee walked past him through the door and found themselves in the long, narrow hallway that led to Paul's office. Behind them, the soldier closed the heavy door, and the sound echoed in the empty hall. It was as quiet as a tomb once the door closed. None of the outside crowd noises could penetrate the thick walls. The eerie silence, marble floor, high ceilings and large windows made Amanda think of a church. Walking in front of the Wizard's guests, the soldier requested that they follow him. In a few seconds, the trio reached the office door, which the soldier opened with a flourish.

"Scarecrow and Mrs. King!" the soldier loudly and clearly announced.

"Here we go," Lee whispered in Amanda's ear. He placed his hand in the small of her back and nudged her into the cavernous room.

The Wizard was seated on a throne of green marble, dead center in the middle of the room. "Scarecrow! I was surprised to hear you were here in Oz." Paul rose from the chair and hurried forward. He extended his hand to shake Lee's. "It's good to see you," he warmly greeted his old friend. Nodding to Amanda, he added, "Nice to meet you, Mrs. King."

Lee withdrew his hand from Paul's. "Is it?" he asked sarcastically. "Or are you glad to have us nearby so you can kill us on your own territory."

"Lee!" Amanda gasped.

Paul's eyes narrowed. "I don't know what you're talking about, Lee."

"Oh, really? Are you trying to tell me you aren't aware that a number of women from the Oz Network have been murdered?"

"Of course I know about the murders. They were my people!"

"Where were you last week, Paul?"

"Doing my job, Scarecrow." Paul's voice was now as cold as steel. "Where were *you*?"

Lee ignored the subtle accusation. "How about yesterday? Where were you yesterday?"

"I was right here."

"How convenient for you," Lee scoffed. "Nobody in Oz would dare say you weren't in the Emerald City when Amanda and I were almost blown to bits at the Tin Man's house."

Shock was clearly evident on Paul's face. "What? An explosion? The Tin Man, is he...?"

"He wasn't there."

Paul closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. "Good." He opened his eyes and stared into Lee's. "I had nothing to do with it, I swear. You know as well as I do that Serdeych is behind the murders."

"I know it's Serdeych," Lee growled through clenched teeth. "I think *you*," he jabbed Paul in the chest with his index finger, "are Serdeych. I should kill you right here."

Amanda held Scarecrow firmly in place when Paul took a step back from him. "Lee, give him a chance to defend himself."

"Defend myself. I never thought I'd have to defend myself to you, Scarecrow. You can't seriously think I'm Serdeych! Lee, I trained you! We worked side by side in one of the greatest operations the Agency has ever known. We built the Oz Network from nothing. I even gave you your name." Paul shook his head. "Now, you come here to accuse me of being the man who murdered Dorothy?" Rubbing his forehead with both hands, as if the action would erase the situation, Paul looked sadly into Lee's eyes. "How could you even think such a thing?" Paul looked from Lee to Amanda, searching their faces for signs that they believed him. "Mrs. King? You seem to be the voice of reason here. You believe me, don't you?"

Amanda swallowed hard and looked at Lee. She could see that he desperately wanted to trust Paul, but logic and feelings were at war with each other inside him. Keeping her attention focused on Lee, Amanda replied, "I don't know what to think, Mr. Barnes."

Locking his eyes with Lee's, Paul asked, "What do I have to say to convince you, Scarecrow?" The Wizard surreptitiously slid his left hand into his jacket pocket.

"There's nothing you can say."

"Then I'll just have to find Serdeych. I'm sorry to have to do this, Lee." Before Lee could react, Paul yanked his hand out of his pocket and threw something on the floor. Green smoke immediately filled the space between Paul and Lee, and an acrid smell permeated the room. Lee and Amanda doubled over, coughing, both slightly off guard for a split-second. That was all the time Paul needed. The Wizard quickly delivered a karate chop to the back of Lee's neck and disappeared behind the smoke screen. Lee slumped to the floor.

"Lee! Lee!" Amanda's voice came to him as if through a fog. He could feel her hand rubbing the bruise at the base of his neck.

Lee blinked his eyes a few times and finally focused on the big brown eyes staring worriedly at him. He grimaced as she massaged the tender spot. "I feel like a house fell on me. How's it look?"

"You're gonna have a nasty bump," she informed him, "but you'll live."

"Help me up, will ya, and get us out of this smoke." Amanda tucked Pinto under her left arm and slid her right around Lee's waist so he could lean into her as he stood. "I blew it, Amanda. He's gone."

"Oh, you didn't blow it. How could you have known he'd have some sort of..." Amanda looked questioningly at Lee. "What was that stuff anyway?"

"Black magic," Lee supplied. "The Wizard has more of it than anyone I know. I should have been prepared for something like that."

Amanda tightened her grip on Lee's waist as they made their way out of Paul's office into the hallway. "What do we do now?"

"First, we call Billy and let him know what happened. Then, we go after Paul."

"Lee," Amanda protested, "you're not in any shape to..."

Lee cut her off with a hard glare. "I'm fine." He pointed down the corridor in the opposite direction from the main entrance. "That way. We'll find a phone in the soldier's office."

Knowing it was pointless to mention that he'd just inhaled a lot of 'black magic' gunk and had a lump on his head the size of a Goofy Golf golf ball, Amanda just sighed and began walking. 'One of these days, he'll realize he's not Superman,' she thought to herself, 'and I hope it's *before* he tries to outrun a speeding bullet.'

The pair quickly made their way to the soldier's office. As soon as they entered the room, Amanda sank into a chair by the door and Lee made a beeline for the phone. He perched on the desk and immediately dialed Billy's number. "Billy, it's Scarecrow."

"It's about time! You should have checked in hours ago."

"Yeah, well, Billy, the bomb at the Tin Man's house slowed us down a little." Accurately predicting Billy's reaction to that news, Lee moved the phone away from his ear.

From the other side of the room, Amanda could clearly hear Billy's response. "BOMB???? WHAT BOMB?????"

Lee and Amanda grinned at each other. It was comforting to know that Billy was always Billy, no matter what the situation.

"Calm down, Billy. We're all right, not that you asked. The Tin Man wasn't there at the time. Did you reach him?"

"I talked to him right after you and Amanda started for the Emerald City. He should have been waiting for you."

Lee frowned. "Well, we haven't seen him *or* the Lion."

"I'll send out a search party," Billy decided. "I can't have agents missing all over Oz. It makes us look silly. Anything else to report?"

"Well, ah," Lee suddenly became very interested in straightening his stuffing, "there are a couple of other things."

"Out with it, man! I don't have all day."

Taking a deep breath, Lee tried the Amanda approach. "It's like this, Billy. We were almost to the Emerald City when someone spliced a rope with an axe and tried to drop a net on me. It would have worked if Amanda hadn't seen it falling and warned me in the nick of time. Once we got into the City, we met with Paul. For some reason, he took offense at being accused of being Serdeych and he vowed to find Serdeych himself. I have a few ideas where he might have gone, so Amanda and I are off to catch up with him now. So, if you don't have anything for us, we'll just be on our way."

Before Lee could replace the phone in its cradle, Billy's authoritative voice boomed over the phone. "Hold it, Scarecrow! Somewhere in that long-winded report did I hear you say the Wizard got away?"

Lee covered the mouthpiece with one hand and whispered to Amanda, "It was worth a shot."

"Nice try, Stetson," Amanda laughed, "but rambling is an acquired skill that should not be attempted by novices."

He wrinkled his nose at her and returned his attention to the phone. "Yeah, Billy, he got away. I think I know where he's going, though."

"The Haunted Forest?"

"You got it, Billy."

Billy was silent for a moment. "I'm sending Francine out to help you. She'll be there in ten minutes."

"Billy, Amanda and I really need to move now if we want to intercept Paul."

"Ten minutes will not make a difference, Scarecrow. You will wait for Francine, understood?"

"Yeah, yeah, we'll wait for Francine." At the mention of Francine's name, Amanda grimaced. Lee mouthed 'I know, I know' at her. Into the phone, he said, "We'll meet her outside the Emerald City gate." Lee hung up the phone and smiled apologetically

at Amanda as he crossed the room to her. "Sorry, partner, but we're stuck with Francine on this one."

Amanda looked up at Lee and smiled. "It's a small price to pay for finding Serdeych, isn't it?"

Lee reached for Amanda's hand and pulled her up from the chair. "A very small price," he agreed. Turning her wrist to look at Amanda's watch, Lee noted the time. "Let's go. I want to head for the Haunted Forest the second Francine gets here."

Retracing their earlier steps, Lee and Amanda reached the hallway entrance in less than a minute. Lee cautiously opened the door. Seeing that the crowd had dispersed, he beckoned to Amanda to follow him out into the courtyard. "We can skirt around the town and make it to the gate in a few minutes. Stick close to me."

Amanda nodded and fell into place right behind Lee, immediately walking into him. Lee glared at her over his shoulder. "Sorry. Close, but not **that** close." She took a small step backward to keep from tripping over Lee's feet.

When they reached the Emerald City entrance, Lee pulled the great door open and motioned for Amanda to precede him outside. Instead of slipping out the door, Amanda turned back toward the center of the City. "That's strange," she commented.

"What?"

"Don't you find it odd that we haven't seen a single person? On our way in, it seemed like the entire population was waiting for us. Now, there isn't a soul in sight."

Lee nodded. He looked speculatively around the City then snapped his fingers. "The Wizard! Of course!"

"Huh?"

Scarecrow grabbed Amanda by the shoulders excitedly. "Don't you see? When the Wizard left his office, everyone followed him! They always do. It's big news when he appears, because he rarely allows people to see him. Wherever the crowd is, that's where Paul is - or was." He scanned the City one more time. "But where?"

"Oh, Lee. I think I know." Amanda pointed at the sky. "There! He's taking the balloon!"

Lee looked up and saw the Wizard's balloon floating above the green towers of the Emerald City. He pointed at a sea of green in an open courtyard below where the balloon had risen and noted, "And that's where everybody is." Turning back to Amanda, he said, "I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I'm glad Billy decided to send Francine. We wouldn't be able to intercept that balloon without her."

Amanda shook her head in confusion. "I don't get it."

Lee chuckled. "You will. Come on, let's get outside to meet her." He once again motioned for her to pass through the City gate. Once outside, Amanda sat down on the City steps to wait for Francine. Lee paced behind her, never taking his eyes from the Wizard's balloon.

A sudden gust of wind ruffled Amanda's hair. Turning her face to push the hair out of her eyes, she was surprised to see Francine standing right in front of her. "Oh, Francine! I didn't see you arrive."

Lee glanced at Amanda's watch as he hurriedly pulled her up off the steps. "Ten minutes on the dot. Very impressive."

Francine smirked. "'On time every time,' that's the Witch of the Southwest's motto." She settled onto her broom. "Ready to go? I just happen to have two seats available on the next direct flight to the Haunted Forest. Hop on."

"Hop on?" Amanda repeated.

Rolling her eyes, Francine mouthed 'amateurs' at Lee. She smiled condescendingly at Amanda and said, "Yes, dear. Hop on. Get on the broom."

Amanda tightened her grip on Pinto and looked at Lee. "You can't be serious. That thing doesn't look safe at all."

"Amanda, it's perfectly safe. How do you think Francine got here in ten minutes?"

"That's how - ten minutes? Wait just a second. Are you saying we could have used a broom and gotten to the Emerald City in ten minutes?" Amanda placed her left

hand on her hip in a defiant stance and tucked Pinto into the triangular shaped opening. With her right hand, she ticked off their encounters. "We could have avoided the bomb," she aimed her index finger directly at Lee, "the net," a second finger joined her index finger, "the roses..."

Before her third finger could join the first two, Lee caught Amanda's hand between both of his. "Ah, Amanda, we get the picture. That's not important now. Get on the broom." He pushed her forward and forcibly settled her sidesaddle on the broom behind Francine. "It's the only way we'll catch up with Paul, and we don't have time to waste." He sat behind Amanda, pulled her back against his chest and wrapped his arms around her.

Francine looked over her shoulder. "Everyone cozy?" Her passengers nodded. "Good. Let me just remind you that this is a non-smoking flight. We don't have any seat belts, but..." seeing how tightly Amanda was snuggled against Lee, she remarked, "I see you've taken care of *that* situation."

"Francine!" Lee growled. His patience was definitely wearing thin. Emphatically pointing at the balloon that was fast becoming a speck in the distance. "Follow that balloon!"

With that, Francine pushed off with her red, white and gold designer stocking clad foot and they were off into the wild blue yonder. "Haunted Forest, here we come."

The only sound was Amanda's faint "Oh My Gosh!" as they soared above the Emerald City in hot pursuit of the Wizard.

"Lee," Amanda squeaked. "Do you think we could slow down a little."

"Amanda, we can't slow down. We have to catch up to the Wizard." Lee leaned forward a little and tapped Francine on the shoulder. "Come on, Francine. Give it all she's got, will ya?"

"Do you see a gas pedal? I could go faster without the excess baggage," Francine glared pointedly at Amanda and Pinto, "and all that whining *must* be creating drag."

Immediately, an apology sprang to Amanda's lips, even though Francine didn't deserve one. "I'm sorry, Francine," Amanda said as she shrank back against Lee. "I've never been on a flying broom before, and it's, well," she cautiously peered at the ground, "it's awfully high up here."

"You're afraid of heights?" Lee asked, rather surprised. Usually, nothing phased Amanda.

"I'm not afraid of heights," Amanda retorted. She took another glance at the ground and shuddered slightly. "But I'm not crazy about them, either."

Lee chuckled and wrapped his arms around her more tightly, pulling her closer to him so she couldn't see the ground. "It's all right, Amanda. I won't let anything happen to you."

< We now interrupt this fanfic for an important word from the author!

The following was my original paragraph. I have no idea what I was thinking when I wrote it. I was obviously high on SMK. It has been left in here for a_bit_dotty's enjoyment:

** Amanda closed her eyes and willed herself to relax in Lee's arms. Even with the thought of being hundreds of yards above ground with nothing to protect her but Lee's arms floating around in her head, she felt safe. **

What follows, in the 'published story' is the corrected paragraph, written after a_bit_dotty and I stopped ROLFING long enough for me to fix it.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic. >

Amanda closed her eyes and willed herself to relax in Lee's arms. Even with the thought floating around in her head that she was hundreds of yards above ground with nothing to protect her but Lee's arms, she felt safe.

Lee smiled over Amanda's head as he felt the tension ease from her body. He looked into the distance at the Wizard's balloon. Francine was making progress, but not enough. "Francine, I don't think we'll catch him before we reach the Haunted Forest."

Francine eyed the distance to the balloon and took their current wind speed into consideration. "You're probably right. He had just enough of a lead on us to beat us there. We'll be right behind him, though. You think he spotted us?"

"He wouldn't be the Wizard if he didn't."

The three lapsed into silence as Francine, intent on closing as much distance between them and Paul before he reached the woods, tried to coax a little more speed out of the broom.

Amanda kept her eyes shut and, in her mind's eye, replayed what had happened since leaving Munchkin Land. 'Was there some clue that would prove, without a doubt, that Paul is or isn't Serdeych?' she wondered. 'I know there's something we're missing, but I just can't put my finger on it.' Amanda tried to make sense of the thoughts tumbling through her head, but a connection remained elusive.

Lee's thoughts were taking a similar path. He was uncomfortable thinking that his friend - his mentor - could be one of his worst enemies, but it seemed likely. What little evidence they had, however circumstantial, pointed right at Paul. 'Think, Scarecrow!' he commanded his inner self. Lee's mind wandered to the bomb at the Tin Man's house. Something about it flitted on the edge of his mind.

"He's landing." Francine's announcement brought everyone's focus back to the present. The trio watched the Wizard negotiate the balloon onto the ground at the edge of the forest.

"How soon before we land?" Lee asked.

"A minute, maybe two. The steeper the dive, the faster we'll get there." Francine angled the broom toward the balloon. "Hold on!"

Amanda squeezed her eyes shut once again and her stomach did flip-flops as Francine began their rapid descent. "I will never complain about roller coasters again," she swore under her breath. The sudden change in the broom's course caused Lee to shift forward into Amanda. He released his hold on her waist and grabbed the broom in front of her to stop them from sliding right into Francine. Bending at the waist, Lee pushed Amanda and himself closer to parallel with the broom, using Francine's body as a shield from the wind that was furiously whipping them. Francine's cape swirled around them, offering some protection.

Moments later, Francine brought the broom to a smooth stop mere feet from Paul's balloon.

Lee straightened up, pulling Amanda with him. He took notice of the paleness of her skin. "You OK?" he asked, concerned that the trip might have been a little too much for her.

Amanda took a deep breath. "I think so." Taking inventory, she joked, "Two arms, two legs, one dog. Everything looks all right."

Laughing, Lee slid off the broom then cupped his hand under Amanda's elbow to help her back onto solid ground. 'I should have known she'd go with the flow. Nothing phases Amanda for too long,' he thought. Taking in Amanda's wind-blown hair and wide eyes, he leaned close to her and softly whispered in her ear, "Everything looks more than 'all right.'"

Amanda turned to stare into Lee's beautiful, beautiful, beautiful eyes. What she saw there brought a smile to her face. His words, the sound of his voice and the look in his eyes took her breath away and sent a shiver up her spine.

"Cold?" Lee asked with a grin, knowing full well the shivering had little to do with the temperature.

"Lee!" Francine's voice broke the spell that had come over Lee and Amanda and the two quickly, almost guiltily, jumped apart. Amanda set Pinto down on the ground and rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans. Lee jammed one hand into his pocket and coughed nervously into the other. Francine moved to stand next to Amanda and observed the pair with suspicious interest. 'Hmm. I wonder just what is going on between those two?' she asked herself. Aloud, she addressed Lee. "While you were busy making sure Amanda had her 'land legs' back, I checked the balloon basket. Paul left a note for you."

Lee took the slip of paper from Francine's outstretched hand, read it, and then crumpled it into a ball. "He wants us to meet him at the Wicked Witch of the West's castle."

"It's probably a trap," Francine warned.

"That's a chance we'll have to take." Lee began pacing in front of the women. "We just need to figure out how to trap *him* before he can trap *us*."

Amanda frowned. "Wouldn't we have to get there **before** Mr. Barnes to set up a trap of our own?"

"You are absolutely right, Amanda." Lee stopped pacing and pointed his finger at her. "We have to get there before Paul." He smiled broadly at Francine.

Francine returned the grin and nodded her head. "It could be done."

Correctly interpreting the exchange between the two agents, Amanda moaned, "Oh, no, not the broom again?"

Lee nodded. "The broom again, Amanda. It's the only way we'll beat Paul to the castle. He's on foot."

"Surely you can't fly that thing in the woods?"

"Which is exactly why Paul won't be expecting it." Casually, Lee added, "Besides, if anyone **could** fly a broom through a forest, it would be Francine. Oh, and Amanda," Lee winked at her, "please don't call me Shirley."

Amanda rolled her eyes, slightly surprised that he could joke about something so serious. She turned away from Lee and confronted Francine. "Do you mean to tell me that you have **never** flown a broom through a forest, but you're going to **try** to fly a broom through a forest because Mr. Barnes doesn't **think** you can fly a broom through a forest?"

"What's wrong with that?" Francine shrugged. "You can stay here, if you're too scared to fly again," she challenged Amanda, fully expecting the housewife to decide to keep both her feet planted firmly on the ground.

"What's **wrong** with that?" Amanda shook her head and threw her hands up in the air. "You people are crazy!" She turned her back on Lee and Francine, folded her arms across her chest and stared at the broom. Chewing on her lower lip, Amanda considered what Lee said. Logically, she knew he was right. The broom was the only way. Sighing heavily, she bent down and picked up Pinto. She drew herself up to her full height, took a deep breath and walked to the broom. Rubbing the handle, she addressed it. "Let's hope **you** know how to navigate the woods, even if Francine doesn't, because I don't want to slam into a tree on the way to the castle."

Lee smiled like a proud father watching his child take her first steps. He quickly moved to her side and put his arm around her shoulders. "I knew you'd see this through to the end."

"Do you have to put it that way?" Amanda asked, smiling at her partner.

Francine brushed past Amanda and plopped onto the broom. "Let's get this show on the road. Amanda, leave that," she wrinkled her nose and pointed disdainfully at Pinto, "*thing* here. The less we're carrying, the better."

"No, Francine."

"No?" The snippy blonde's eyebrows shot up so high they disappeared under her poofy bangs. She couldn't believe Amanda was daring to contradict her.

"No!" Amanda shook her head vigorously and stared defiantly at Francine. "Pinto is my responsibility. Mother was very clear about that. He goes where I go."

"You have got to be kidding. We're taking a stuffed animal on a dangerous mission because your mother told you to?"

Amanda set her jaw. She was not going to let Francine win this argument. "Yes, Francine. I listen to my mother."

"Argh!" Lee erupted. "Enough! Francine, the dog comes with us. Amanda, get on the broom. Now!"

Amanda clamped her mouth shut and immediately lowered herself onto the broom behind Francine and hugged Pinto to her chest. When Lee used that particular tone, she knew it was best to just do what he asked.

"But, Lee," Francine protested, "it's a *stuffed animal*! What possible reason..."

"No 'buts,' Francine," Lee interrupted her tirade. He settled in behind Amanda, once again nestling her in his arms for comfort. "Just drive - or fly - or whatever it is you do to make this broom move!"

Furiously, Francine stamped her foot on the ground and the broom jerked forward at an alarming rate. Her anger caused the vehicle to careen dangerously toward the woods. Frantically, she worked to bring the broom under control.

"Ohhhhh, noooooo!" Amanda wailed. She closed her eyes and ducked her head, not particularly wanting to watch as they sped directly toward a large tree.

Lee tried to cover Amanda's body with as much of his as possible, bracing them for what seemed like certain impact. "Francine, do something!" he shouted above the roar of the wind.

At the last second, Francine won her battle with the broom and they swerved away from the woods, narrowly avoiding a catastrophe. Somehow, she managed to bring them to a standstill a few hundred feet away from the forest.

For a few seconds, the only sound was the rapid breathing of the three agents as they tried to compose themselves.

Francine was the first to recover. She sat up straight on her perch and patted the broom handle. "Well, I guess this baby has a mind of her own."

"Just like a couple of women I know," Lee laughed.

Amanda shook her head incredulously. "I will never understand how you people manage to laugh at times like this."

"If you don't laugh, you'll cry, and you know darn well I'm not going to let anyone, especially Lee Stetson and a dog-toting housewife from Arlington, see me cry," Francine explained. "This is no business for a cry-baby."

"That's right," Lee concurred. "Francine, do you think you, and our trusty sweeper here, have calmed down enough to take another run at the Haunted Forest? We're burning daylight."

Francine nodded and turned her attention back to the task at hand. "OK, my pretty," she addressed the broom, "let's see what we can do when we work together." Gently pushing off from the ground, Francine coaxed the broom back into the air. Slowly, they turned and flew back toward the forest. This time, she expertly maneuvered them between two large trees at the outer edge of the woods. "This isn't so bad, is it?" Francine called over her shoulder to her passengers as she continued to navigate through the maze of trees.

"Not bad at all, Francine," Lee acknowledged. "I knew you could do it." He lowered his head and spoke into Amanda's ear. "How are you doing, Amanda?"

"Oh, fine, just fine," she replied, relaxing a bit, despite the constant zig-zagging path of the broom. "You know, people dodging trees on a broom could be one heck of a scene in a movie. The boys would love it."

As close as Lee was holding her, Amanda could feel the rumble in his chest when he chuckled. "More like an amusement park ride, wouldn't you say?"

"Now that I have the hang of this," Francine shouted, "I'm going to speed up a bit."

"Wait, Francine, I don't think... Whoa!" Lee interrupted his own warning when the broom instantly responded to Francine's request and began moving more rapidly through the woods. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"It's perfectly fine," she answered, but her voice betrayed her confidence. The broom was continuing to pick up speed, even though she hadn't done anything. "Um, then again, maybe it isn't."

The broom apparently had interpreted Francine's initial request as an order to gradually go faster. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, they were zipping through the forest toward the Wicked Witch of the West's castle, dipping, swaying, swerving and, at times, clipping branches of trees. Nothing Francine did or said could slow their flight. She, Amanda and Lee could only cling to the handle for dear life and hope they survived the ride. When the castle loomed into view, the broom gradually reduced its speed. It came to an abrupt halt inches in front of the drawbridge. It didn't take the agents long to scramble off the broom the instant it stopped.

The second Francine's feet met solid ground, she began straightening her clothing and removing twigs from her hair. "Flying is really for the birds."

"You're right, Francine. Just look what horrible things it does to your hair!" Amanda knew she was on thin ice, teasing Francine about her appearance, but it was too good an opportunity to miss. 'Oh, well, in for a penny, in for a pound,' she thought. Slowly looking Francine up and down, she added, "You look like you just flew through a tornado."

Francine moved close to Amanda and hissed, "I'll get you, Amanda, and your little dog, too!"

"Oh my gosh!" Amanda exclaimed. She hugged Pinto to her chest protectively. "Don't worry, Pinto. I won't let that witch get her hands on you."

"Oh? What are you going to do to stop me?"

Lee stepped between Francine and Amanda. "Will you two can it! We need to prepare for Paul's arrival." He pointed to the tower to the left of the castle entrance. "Francine, that's your lookout position, and Amanda," he aimed his finger at the tower to their right, "that's yours. I'll see what I can find inside to use as weapons. Ready?"

"Ready," Francine and Amanda replied in unison.

"Good. Let's go."

The three quickly crossed the drawbridge and approached the castle opening. Lee signaled for the women to wait while he performed a cursory check of the entrance hall. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary inside, Lee motioned for them to join him. He looked at Francine and nodded toward the staircase on their left.

"Be careful, Scarecrow," she cautioned before quickly climbing the stairs to her appointed lookout position.

Lee placed his hand in the small of Amanda's back and led her to the stairway to the other tower. "If you see Paul, sing out."

"Loud and long," Amanda replied. She placed her hand on Lee's arm. "Lee, please be careful."

"*You* be careful."

"Oh, Lee. I'll be perfectly safe." Amanda jerked her thumb at the tower. "What can possibly happen to me up there?"

Lee threw his head back and moaned. "Amanda, whenever you say you'll be safe, and that nothing can happen, that's when I know I should worry about you the most."

"Then maybe I should stay with you," Amanda suggested. "You know, watch your back?"

Meeting Amanda's smiling eyes, Lee couldn't help but smile in return. "That's a good idea. I suddenly have a really bad feeling about letting you out of my sight." He covered her hand with his. "Your lookout position has just been changed. Let's go see what we can find in the Witch's rooms."

Together, they crossed the entry hall and scurried up the stairway in the center of the castle. Both were so intent on reaching the Witch's chambers as soon as possible, neither noticed someone creep down the tower staircase Amanda had planned to take. "You are still as predictable as ever, Scarecrow. I've got you right where I want you," he murmured.

In the Witch's chambers, Lee and Amanda each took a side of the room to search. They were not having much luck locating anything they could classify as a weapon. Amanda opened a small cabinet and found a number of small leather pouches and vials of strange-smelling liquid. She picked up one of the pouches and undid the drawstring tie. "Lee? This looks like what Mr. Barnes used on us."

A few long strides brought Lee to Amanda's side. He took the opened pouch from her and nodded. "Yeah, yeah. This is the same thing. Where'd you find this?"

She pointed to the open cabinet. "There are other things here, too."

Lee got on his knees to take inventory of the cabinet. "Oh, yeah, this is a gold mine. There are enough black magic ingredients in here to confuse even the Wizard." He glanced around and spotted a small sack a few feet away. "Grab that sack and let's take this stuff with us." The sound of a shrill whistle brought Lee to his feet. "That's Francine's signal. Someone's here. Make it quick, Amanda." He closed the pouch he was holding and tossed it to Amanda then moved to the door, carefully opening it a crack to see if anyone had entered the castle.

"Right." Amanda retrieved the bag and knelt in front of the cabinet. She set Pinto onto the ground in order to hold the bag open with one hand and carefully place the contents of the cabinet into it with the other.

"Come on, Amanda!" Lee gestured impatiently with his left hand.

Before crossing the room to join Lee, Amanda ran her hand along the cabinet shelves to be sure she had everything. "I'm coming, I'm coming." She scooped Pinto off the floor and made her way to the door. "Is it the Wizard?" she whispered.

Lee shook his head. "I haven't seen anyone yet." Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Francine making her way into the castle entryway. "What is Francine doing?"

A puzzled Amanda and Lee watched Francine crouch near the drawbridge entrance and motion to someone outside the castle.

"Oh my gosh, it's Toto!" Amanda exclaimed. She slipped past Lee and bounded down the steps to meet Dorothy's dog.

"Amanda! Wait!" Lee called after her, but his words fell on deaf ears. After taking a quick look around to assure himself that nobody was watching them, he followed Amanda down the stairs. By the time he reached her, she and Francine were already on the ground, cooing over the little terrier. The dog appeared to be enjoying the attention immensely. "Francine, you are supposed to be our lookout, and Amanda..." he stopped mid-sentence when Amanda looked up at him, her eyes wide with excitement and a huge smile on her face.

"Look, Lee! It's Toto! I can't believe it's really Toto!" Amanda's pure enjoyment about meeting the dog was enough to erase Lee's irritation.

With an exasperated sigh, Lee knelt down next to Amanda. "Amanda, I know you're excited to meet Toto, but we can't forget why we're here. Paul could be along any second."

"I'm already here, Scarecrow." Lee whirled around at the sound of Paul's voice. "I see my 'advance man,' or, in this case, 'advance dog,' did his job very well."

Rising slowly, Lee clenched his jaw and turned his head to glare at Francine. "That's just great! You fell for the oldest trick in the book!"

Francine jumped to her feet and defended herself, anger and hurt evident in her voice. "How was I supposed to know Toto was with Paul? Did *you* know?"

"Francine, *you* *are* *a* *trained* *agent*!" Lee emphasized each word with a finger jab, leaving no doubt that he was highly agitated. "You should have been more suspicious!"

Amanda stood up and positioned herself between Lee and Francine. "Lee, stop fighting with Francine!" she commanded her partner, using her best 'mom' tone of voice. "Mr. Barnes is here, and we just have to deal with it."

Lee took a deep breath and slowly exhaled it to calm himself. "You're right, Amanda." He turned his attention back to Paul. The two stared at each other in extremely uncomfortable silence, neither sure what to say.

"Lee?" Amanda tugged Lee's sleeve to get his attention. "I've been thinking."

"Well, there's a first time for everything," Francine murmured.

Ignoring Francine's snarky comment, Amanda continued, "Would Toto be with Mr. Barnes if he was the one who killed Dorothy?"

Used to Amanda's roundabout way of looking at things, Lee prompted her to explain. "Amanda, what are you getting at?"

"Well, I mean, animals sense things better than people, so I don't think Toto would hang around with Mr. Barnes if he was the one who murdered Dorothy." Amanda looked from Lee to Paul to Francine and back to Lee. "Right?"

The man on the tower steps pressed his back against the wall, fading deeper into the castle shadows as he silently observed the scene unfolding below him. The King woman was smarter than he expected. She was going to convince Scarecrow that the Wizard was NOT Serdeych. "I knew I should have taken care of that dog!" he berated himself. "No matter. They will all die now, anyway." He crept along the staircase until he was in the tower. A huge chandelier hung over the entrance hall, held in place by a single rope attached to a bracket next to him. "Say goodbye to Oz!" he muttered gleefully as he forcefully swung his axe. The powerful blow sliced cleanly through the heavy rope and sent the chandelier hurtling toward the agents.

The sound of the falling chandelier alerted the foursome to the impending danger. Francine and Paul immediately rolled toward the castle walls, and Toto ran to the safety of the drawbridge. Instinctively, Lee pushed Amanda out of the path of the falling fixture before somersaulting out of the way. The force of Lee's shove

caused Amanda to lose her grip on the bag full of 'black magic' powders and it slammed against the wall. Liquid from crushed vials merged with powders inside the bag, causing small explosions to echo in the castle hall. Smoke began to fill the hall.

When the man in the tower saw the agents dive for safety, he pounded his fist against the wall. He headed for the back of the castle to exit, when the sight of a crossbow stopped him. Smiling, he dropped his axe and picked up the weapon. The smoke in the hall was quickly becoming thick, but he could still see his target. Leaning over the castle wall, he aimed directly at Scarecrow and let the arrow loose. Without waiting to find out if the arrow met its mark, the man took advantage of the confusion in the hall to make his escape.

"Lee! Lee! Where are you?" Amanda coughed and waved her arms to clear some of the smoke away from her. She spotted Lee against the wall and made her way to him, ducking low to stay out of the smoke as it rose toward the ceiling.

Lee rolled over and saw Amanda approaching him. His eyes grew wide with alarm as he saw the arrow speeding toward her. "Amanda! Look out!" he shouted, pointing at the arrow, praying she'd understand and duck or move to the side.

Amanda turned to see what Lee was pointing at and, without thinking, held up her hands to block the arrow. Lee reached her side in time to witness the arrow's thud as it struck Pinto. Lee caught Amanda's arm as it jerked backward from the impact of the arrow hitting her stuffed animal.

"Amanda, that was really something! What made you think to use Pinto?"

"Oh, I, uh, well," Amanda shrugged her shoulders and held up Pinto for closer inspection, "I think it was Pinto's idea, not mine."

"What was Pinto's idea?" Francine asked. She and Paul had found their way through the smoke to Lee and Amanda.

Amanda held up Pinto in front of Francine's shocked face. "I guess this *thing* came in handy after all."

"I don't believe it. Saved by a stuffed dog." Francine shook her head and took Pinto from Amanda to examine the damage. "Amanda, you have got to be the luckiest person I know."

"I hate to be an alarmist," Paul said, "but I don't like the look or smell of this smoke. I think more explosions are likely. We also have to neutralize these chemicals as fast as possible or the entire castle could blow."

Francine sniffed the air and recognized the acrid scent as something extremely dangerous. "You must have something in the balloon or at your office that would do the trick."

"At my office, yes," Paul acknowledged, "but getting there and back will take time - time we may not have."

"We can take the broom," Francine suggested. Turning to Lee, she elaborated, "Paul and I can go to his office and get what he needs to make all this go away. You and Amanda can head back to the balloon. You'll be far enough from here to be out of harm's way if the place does explode. We can take Toto with us and leave him in the Emerald City, so we know he's safe."

Lee nodded his agreement. "Good idea, Francine. You two go on ahead. We'll meet you at your balloon after you take care of this mess."

Paul clapped his left hand on Lee's shoulder. "It's good to be working together again, Scarecrow."

"It sure is, Paul." The two men smiled at each other, both relieved that Lee's suspicions of Paul had been laid to rest. "You had better get going."

"Come on, Francine," Paul urged. "I'm dying to find out how you negotiated the forest on that broom." With a final wave to Lee and Amanda, and a "Be careful" warning from Francine, the pair swiftly left the castle to return to the Emerald City.

Amanda chuckled. "Mr. Barnes will probably wish he hadn't said 'dying' to find out once they get on that broom." Her laugh turned into a cough when she inhaled some of the still thick smoke.

"We had better get going, too," Lee said and reached for Amanda's hand. As they started for the entrance, he winced when he put weight on his left foot.

"What's wrong, Lee?"

"I don't know. It feels like something burned a hole in my thigh."

"Let's get outside and take a look. Here, lean on me." Amanda wrapped her arm around Lee's waist and supported him as they made their way to fresh air.

Once outside, Lee leaned against the castle wall and felt his left thigh. Feeling a large lump in his pocket, he pulled out the Tin Man's watch, now completely crushed as well as melted. "I must have landed on this," he said, holding the watch in front of him for Amanda to see.

"Oh! The Tin Man! The Tin Man!" Amanda shouted.

Lee sighed as he rubbed his sore thigh. "Amanda, what are you talking about?"

"Don't you see, Lee?" The bomb - the Tin Man was supposed to be there, but he wasn't. The net - I saw the sun reflect off something shiny, then an axe cut the rope. The roses - only someone close to you and Mr. Barnes would have known how much you hate them, and why. The chandelier - that rope was cut as cleanly as the rope." Amanda gently opened Lee's fist and uncovered the watch. "And the Tin Man hasn't got a heart." Slowly, she raised her head to meet Lee's confused gaze. "The Tin Man hasn't got a heart," she repeated softly.

"We gotta get back to Oz to warn Francine and Mr. Barnes! They - and Toto - are in danger. The Tin Man hasn't got a heart!"

Phillip and Jamie stared at their mother from the doorway of the den, puzzled to see her asleep on the couch, fully clothed.

"We gotta get back to Oz... Toto... Tin Man hasn't got a heart," Amanda mumbled, her copy of 'The Wizard of Oz' lying open upon her chest.

The boys leaned over the back of the couch. Phillip tapped Jamie on the shoulder and pointed at their mother.

Jamie gently shook Amanda's shoulder. "Mom."

"Hmm?" Amanda sleepily replied.

"Mom," Jamie repeated, a little louder than the first time.

"Mmm hmm?"

"Mom, you've been dreaming."

"Shh, sweetheart, you're gonna wake me up." Amanda held her book tighter and rolled onto her side.

"Mom."

"Shh, come on, sweetie."

"Mom, you've been dreaming."

"Hmm?"

"You've been dreaming."

"What was I dreaming?" Amanda asked, propping herself up on one elbow to look at her sons.

"It must have been 'The Wizard of Oz,'" answered Phillip. "You were saying 'Toto' and 'Tin Man.'"

Amanda bolted upright on the couch. She opened her book and looked at the picture of Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion. "The Tin Man hasn't got a heart."

"Yes, he does," replied a mildly confused Phillip.

"He's heartless." Amanda looked from one boy to another. "All right, look. You fellas get your own breakfast and wake your grandmother up in fifteen minutes." Amanda dropped the book, leaned over to pick up her shoes and headed for her room.

"I gotta read that again. It must be better than I remembered," Jamie said, enthusiastically. He and Phillip vaulted over the back of the couch and settled in to

read Amanda's abandoned copy of 'The Wizard of Oz.'

The End